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RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 4297
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0163
RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR 0066
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000131

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SUBJECT: GOU AND CIVIL SOCIETY: ON THE ROAD TO NORMALCY

REF: TASHKENT 79

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: In the past few weeks, the government has taken several positive steps on the civil society front, including: signaling that it will register a German non-governmental organization (NGO); opening three new resource centers for local NGOs; and awarding 22 grants to NGOs through the state-controlled NGO Support Fund. Authorities also renewed the visa of the Director of the Open Dialogue Project, one of the few international human rights NGOs remaining in Tashkent, and ceased blocking the websites of several USAID partner NGOs, including those of the Open Dialogue Project and the National Democratic Institute. Separately, the new Human Rights Watch (HRW) office director is set to arrive in Tashkent in early February, and the American Councils for International Education (ACCELS) has heard that the GOU is considering allowing their return. All of this is encouraging, and we will continue to press the Uzbeks on further progress. End summary.

GOU TAKES STEPS TO REGISTER GERMAN NGO

¶2. (C) German Ambassador Matthais Meyer recently informed the Ambassador that Uzbek authorities have given the green light for registering the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, which is affiliated with Germany's Free Democratic Party. On January 29, German First Secretary Uwe Berndt reported to poloff that the Foundation's accreditation has still not been finalized, but added that the Uzbeks have been giving the "right" signals. The Foundation already has been operating in Tashkent for several years under a local employee, but it now plans to send an expatriate from Germany to lead the office. Two similar foundations affiliated with German

political parties, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (affiliated with the Christian Democratic Party) and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (affiliated with the Social Democratic Party), are already registered and operating in Tashkent.

13. (C) Interestingly enough, one of the main focuses of the Naumann foundation in other countries has been human rights, and Uwe believed that it could become a component of its activities in Uzbekistan. Brandt added that the GOU becomes most suspicious when NGOs "are not open," and that in this case the GOU was satisfied by the transparency of the NGO's goals and funding sources. (Comment: Of course, it may also be possible that the Foundation's forthcoming registration is a response to what most observers view as Germany's support for lifting EU sanctions against Uzbekistan. End comment.)

AUTHORITIES GRANT NEW VISA TO OPEN DIALOGUE DIRECTOR

14. (C) On January 30, authorities renewed the visa of Open Dialogue Project Director Mjusa Sever. She was given a ten-month visa, a longer period than she had been given before. Her organization remains unregistered (Comment: USAID director was informed by the government that Sever should have applied for registration in November, but failed to do so. End comment.) According to Sever, her organization is planning on co-sponsoring conferences and roundtables on human rights and regional security with GOU participation this spring (reftel).

GOVERNMENT OPENS THREE RESOURCE CENTERS FOR NGOS

15. (C) On January 28, poloff was told by independent human rights Rapid Reaction Group member Sukhrob Ismoilov that authorities had recently opened three regional resource centers for NGOs in Tashkent, Bukhara, and Nukus. The centers are to provide assistance to citizen initiative groups that are interested in registering as full-fledged NGOs (Note: After authorities revoked the registration of many international and local NGOs following the 2005 Andijon events, some local NGOs in Uzbekistan voluntarily decided to reform as "initiative groups," which are not required to register with local authorities, but also lack certain legal protections. In addition, new NGOs that have not been able to legally register have opened as initiative groups. End note.)

16. (C) Ismoilov knows an individual who works at the Tashkent center and plans to meet with him soon to find out more about its operations. Ismoilov also plans to inquire about the likelihood of registering a new think tank in Tashkent, "The Social Development Analytical Center," which would be devoted to promoting political and economic reforms in Uzbekistan. According to Ismoilov, the new think tank would include participation by Rapid Reaction Group members and other human rights activists in Uzbekistan.

GOVERNMENT NGO SUPPORT FUND AWARDS GRANTS TO LOCAL GROUPS

17. (C) On January 16, the state-controlled UzReport.com website stated that the government-supported NGO Support Fund of Uzbekistan had awarded 22 local NGOs grants totaling 140 million soums (110,000 dollars). The grants were reportedly awarded for projects focusing on the environment, education, and the rights of children, women, and the disabled. The recipient NGOs listed in the article that poloff recognized were all government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), including the Ayol va Zamon Center, operated by President Karimov's younger daughter Lola and focusing on children's issues. According to the article, the NGO Support Fund of Uzbekistan has financed over 90 projects for a total of 500 million soums (393,000 dollars) since its creation.

18. (C) While attending the human rights group Ezgulik's annual board meeting on January 25, poloff was surprised to hear that several of Ezgulik's regional chairmen expressed interest in applying for grants from the Uzbek government.

As one of only two registered human rights groups in Uzbekistan, Ezgulik is presumably eligible to receive funding from the NGO Support Fund of Uzbekistan, though the Fund has largely supported GONGOs, rather than genuinely independent NGOs like Ezgulik, in the past. Nevertheless, poloff will continue to monitor whether Ezgulik applies for government grants and the result.

GOU CEASES TO BLOCK WEBSITES OF USAID PARTNERS...

¶9. (C) On January 30, USAID director checked the websites of USAID partner organizations in Uzbekistan, many of which were previously blocked by authorities, and discovered that they were now almost all accessible in Uzbekistan. The now unblocked websites include those for ZdravPlus, the National Democratic Institute, the Open Dialogue Project, Bearing Point, and others. One exception was the Population Services International (PSI) website, although USAID director suspected that the website was down for technical reasons, rather than being blocked.

...BUT DEMOCRACY COMMISSION WEBSITES REMAIN BLOCKED

¶10. (C) Several websites sponsored by the Embassy's Democracy Commission grants remain blocked, including www.uzmetronom.com, www.newsuz.com, and uzn-sovesti.narod.ru.

Also in a less positive development, Reporters Without Borders noted in a January 29 press release that Uzbek authorities have blocked the www.uzngo.info website, which serves as a clearinghouse for information on civil society in Uzbekistan and is operated by Alexey Dobrynin, a knowledgeable civil society expert based in Russia. The website published statistics on the number of local NGOs still operating in Uzbekistan, as well as the number of local NGOs forced to close by authorities in recent years.

NEXT TEST: HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH TO RETURN IN EARLY FEBRUARY

¶11. (C) Human Rights Watch (HRW) emailed poloff on January 24 to announce that its new office director, Igor Vorontsov, will begin work in Tashkent around February 7. A Russian citizen from Saint Petersburg, Vorontsov will not need a visa to enter Uzbekistan, but he must receive accreditation to reside and work here. According to HRW, Vorontsov plans to apply for accreditation with the Ministry of Justice as soon as he arrives in Tashkent. Embassy plans to organize a welcome meeting for Vorontsov with European diplomats for the end of February.

POSSIBLE RETURN FOR AMERICAN COUNCILS

¶12. (C) Recently, representatives from the American Councils for International Education (ACCELS) visited the Uzbek Embassy in Washington to discuss ACCELS' desire to reopen its Tashkent office (Note: Along with the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), ACCELS used to implement many of the U.S. government exchange programs in Uzbekistan. Authorities forced both organizations to close their Tashkent offices following the 2005 Andijon events. End note.) An ACCELS representative told the desk in Washington that the Uzbeks were "very interested in the possibility of American Councils re-opening in some fashion in Uzbekistan." ACCELS is now preparing a letter to Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov expressing general interest in resuming some educational programming in Uzbekistan. Separately, the Uzbek DCM in Washington discussed the meeting with the desk and said the GOU would seriously consider the proposal.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Except for the blocking of the Uzngo website, these are all encouraging signs, but only time will tell on how far the Uzbeks are willing to go on permitting the development of

a normal civil society. We will continue to encourage progress by confirming that the Uzbeks follow through on the following specific steps: granting accreditation to HRW's new country director; granting registration to the Open Dialogue Project and ensuring GOU participation at their upcoming events; and unblocking websites supported by the Embassy's Democracy Commission. In addition, we will follow up with Ismoilov to see how the government's new resource centers for NGOs actually operate, as well as monitor whether the state-controlled NGO Support Fund provides grants to truly independent organizations like Ezgulik.

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